

### What Christians Believe

What do Christians believe? If someone asked you, “You are a Christian? You are a believer? What do you believe?”

What would your answer be? We might say that we believe what the Bible teaches, but if the person does not know what the Bible teaches, that answer does not help much.

If our answer is, I believe what the Bible teaches, we need to get ready for the next question, which will be: “And what does the Bible teach?” So today I want to lay out a story form Christians believe. The Bible much prefers story to lists of truths, so here is a story version of what Christians believe.

There is another reason to do the story version: Christian faith is a particular view of history, all history, a particular view of human history, from its beginning to its end. We are in the story. Every human is in the story. It is not accidental that the Bible begins with the beginning of human history, and that the Bible ends with the end of human history. The Bible describes what is *really* happening on earth.

The Bible tells us the story behind the rest of human history, it tells the real story. The world is full of histories, true stories of individual people, groups of people, nations, kings and rulers. These stories are true, but they are like a veil, and the Bible tells us the one great story that is going on behind all these stories.

So this story today, this summary of what Christians believe, is the story behind all the other stories, the history behind all the other histories, the one real human history.

#### **1 Creation: God Made Everything, Heaven and Earth, including People**

The beginning of the story is important, and shapes everything else. The story begins with God making everything, including people. Genesis 1:1 – *In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.*

This beginning separates Christian truth from most other faiths. Looking around, it seems that life on earth always was like this. No. It wasn't always like this. There was a beginning. There was a time when there were no heavens, no earth, and no people. And at that beginning there was God. He was there, and he made the beginning happen.

And God is close to his creation, connected to it. Already by the end of Genesis 1, God spoke to the people twice, first to bless them, and second to give them and animals food. And then at the end of Genesis 1 – *God saw all that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.* God cares about his creation, and he likes it.

## 2 Rebellion

Right from the start, God gave guidance to people on the right ways to live. The two trees in the garden, in Genesis 2-3, amount to God saying, “life always comes from me; let me decide what’s good for you and what is not. If you decide for yourselves, you cut yourself off from life.”

People had every reason to trust God. He made them, and blessed them, and given them food, and it was all very good. But people did not trust that God knew what was good for them and what was not.

Even though they have every reason to believe him, they did not. They doubted God, and began to decide for themselves what was good for them. And that choice, at the beginning of human history, has had huge consequences for human history, and for all creation.

*We* are people, this is *our* story, this is what *we* did at the beginning. *We* walked away from life and from the Creator because *we believed a lie about him*. This is our story. This mistrust, this rebellion against the Creator and this fall, became the default position of all humans, every person. Romans 1-3 shows this more clearly than anywhere else in the Bible, but it starts in Genesis 3 and goes to the very end.

There is an invitation here, also. It is to rebel against the rebellion, to say, “I will not be a part of this. I will trust that life comes from God, and that he’s kind to people and looks for ways to bless people. I’ll trust that he knows what is good for people and what is not, I’ll trust that his ways for people to live come out of his kindness. This is what repentance is: it is rebelling against the human rebellion.

1. Creation
2. Rebellion
3. Doom

## 3 Doom

Turn to Genesis 6. When people rebelled against God, we doomed ourselves. We destroy ourselves and each other. The first human born on earth murdered the second.

By the time of Noah, the whole human population at that time was violent, tearing into each other continually. We live in ways that are self-destructive individually, and we go after each other in awful ways.

But that is not the biggest doom. Genesis 6:5f - *The LORD saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. The LORD regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled. So the LORD said, "I will wipe from the face of the earth the human race I have created—and with them the animals, the*

*birds and the creatures that move along the ground—for I regret that I have made them." But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD.*

The one thing God will not do is abandon his creation. In this text, God is not angry, he's in pain, he's broken hearted. His creation has been ruined by the human rebellion.

But God won't walk away. God is determined that his creation will be good. But people kept ruining it, and so God got angry. In Matthew 3:7, John the Baptist says, "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

God loves his creation, and all that he made, and so he will punish the human rebellion, and it will be awful. He loves people, and invites people with kindness, and tolerance, and patience, calling people to repent, to rebel against the rebellion.

But if people refuse and refuse and refuse, and people most certainly do this, there is judgment coming. This is because God will not walk away. It might look like he has, but it is not abandonment. It is the riches of God's kindness, tolerance, and patience, designed to lead people to repent.

But people do not repent, or rebel against the rebellion. So we are doomed to destruction at the rage of God. This is real bad news, but it is also most certainly a part of the big story. The good news begins with the bad news.

1. God made everything, heavens and earth and all in them, including people.
2. People rebelled against the Creator's ways, not trusting his kindness.
3. Because of this rebellion, people are doomed.
4. God provided a rescue from the doom, a person, a Rescuer

#### **4 Rescue Part I: Israel**

God rescued us in three stages, which we'll get to in a minute. The center of the rescue is a person, Jesus of Nazareth, the Lord sent from heaven. Ultimately, we are saved by that one person, Jesus the Christ.

And the center of his rescue is the three days: the Friday he was crucified, died for our sins, and was buried; the Saturday when heaven and earth waited; and the Sunday when the angel rolled away the stone to show that he was gone, risen just as he said. The three days are the core of how he rescued us.

But there's a long story before that. The rescue part I begins when God created and then chose the nation Israel. It began with Abraham and Sarah, who could not conceive a child. God said, "I will bless you and I will make a great nation of you, I will give you a home, and through you I will bless all the nations on earth." (Gen 12). "Through you I will bless all the nations;" that's important.

God built the nation of Israel from Abraham and Sarah, then Isaac and Rebekah, then the twelve sons of Jacob.

Israel was the best it ever got under king David. They were on their homeland, David completely subdued their enemies, and they were faithful to God. For the most part. That was the peak of Israel's story.

David's kingship occurs about one third of the way through the Old Testament. Before that, it was a bumpy road up, not smooth but bumpy, by which I mean Israel was often unfaithful to God. And after David, the Old Testament tells us of the long bumpy road down. The Old Testament overall is not a happy story.

God wanted to show the whole world how he would bless and care for one faithful nation, but the nation he chose for this was far too often ignored him. But the prophets who called unfaithful Israel back to God always added that God was not done. God would yet restore his people incredibly and gloriously.

So the rescue part 1, Israel, is not a happy story. But it has promise and hope.

## **5 Rescue Part 2: Jesus**

God always kept a part of Israel faithful to himself. God always remembered that he had told Abraham, "Through you I will bless all the nations." Young Mary was a faithful Israelite, and the angel told Mary that God's Spirit would come on her, and she would conceive the Christ. Mary liked this plan. "May it be to me as you have said."

Joseph, from the line of David, was her fiancé, another faithful Israelite. The angel told Joseph to go ahead with wedding plans, and told Joseph what to name the baby. Joseph obeyed. By naming the baby Joseph adopted Jesus into David's line even though he had not fathered the child.

By means of this tricky start, Jesus of Nazareth comes into the world. We have four long Gospels on the life of Jesus, four different portraits of the most important person that ever lived on this earth. We have so much about Jesus because that person is the center of God's kindness to us. We need to know this wonderful peculiar person, this earthy Jesus, because he never changes, that same Jesus is with us every day, to the end of the age.

Jesus picked twelve apostles. That number is not accident, and it is not by coincidence that there were also twelve sons of Jacob and twelve tribes of Israel. Jesus revised Israel. Jesus and his apostles were all faithful Israelites. Jesus was using faithful Israelites to reconstitute Israel, to revise Israel, to give Israel a new foundation.

The revised and reconstituted Israel did not center on Abraham or Moses or David, it centered on Jesus, it was built around Jesus the Christ. Jesus was a descendant of Abraham and of David, and Jesus always defended Moses. But he's the center of the revised Israel, he's the center of the new covenant.

I already said that the three days were the center of the Jesus-rescue, but it's worth repeating. Jesus died for our sins, he died in obedience to his Father, and to take care of us, laying his life down for his sheep. He died in weakness, God raised him, and Jesus lives now by the power of God. Because Jesus did that, he can reconstitute Israel around himself.

### **Detour on the Four Gospels**

I will tell you a story about my last year as a seminary student, about 45 years ago. I was writing a thesis on one part of Mark. I decided in September that I would read the Gospel of Mark right through, three times a week, for that whole semester. Why did I decide that? Two reasons: I thought it would make me more spiritual, whatever that is; and I thought it would make me a better Bible scholar. Those things mattered to me, and I thought by reading Mark so often I could kill two birds with one stone. As they say.

So three mornings a week, Monday Wednesday Friday, I took my NIV to a quiet part of the library and read through Mark. It took a little less than two hours. As I read, my only goal was to pay attention to what I was reading. That's all. It was never drudgery or tedious, nor was it particularly exciting, but it was usually interesting. I noticed many things. A semester has 12 weeks. I missed a few, not many. I read Mark about 30 times.

Something happened that I did not expect. These readings did not make me more spiritual that I could tell, and they did not make me a scholar either. They gave me Jesus. At that time I often went for a walk in the second half of the evening to pray. One evening toward the end of the semester I heard myself say this to Jesus: "Lord, you used to be a theological 'it' but now I feel like I know you."

Do you ever say things that you did not know you believed until you heard the words come out of your mouth? That happens to me once in a while, and that was one of them. I was amazed at what I'd said to the Lord, and as soon as I heard it I knew it was true. The Lord used to be a theological "it" to me, and now I felt like I knew him. I didn't know I had thought he was a theological "it," but after reading Mark so often I could see it looking back. Now Jesus did not feel like someone I'd read about, he felt like someone I'd lived with for two weeks, walking beside him each day all day long. I hadn't, of course, but that was my experience.

I did not have experiences of the presence of Jesus as I read. I just paid attention to the paragraph I was reading, but as I did that, the Holy Spirit was gradually giving me the man Jesus, yesterday and today the same, and forever. The Gospels bring us the Jesus that's with us every day, to the end of the age. We have four versions of the same story, because that man is so important. The Gospels are a big gift to us.

I'm not telling anyone else to do this. I've not done anything like this since then. God will lead you to do what you should do, just as he did to me. I'm just telling you a story that shaped me in ways I did not expect, that I don't tell very often. We all have those. The detour is over.

## 6 Rescue Part 3: Gospel

The gospel is the good news that God offers rescue from our mess and our doom. If we repent, if we rebel against the rebellion, and trust in Jesus, we're saved. And this gives us full citizenship in revised Israel. Something remarkable happens with the revised Israel: through Christ, Gentiles can now have full citizenship!

*Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth... were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel, and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.... You Gentiles are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. Eph 2:11-20*

At this point the story reaches out and grabs you and me. So far, everything has been long ago. Even the coming of Jesus the Rescuer, and his giving his life as a ransom, is 2000 years old. It is an important story, but an old one. But you and I are here today because God made sure the gospel came to us, and he sent his Holy Spirit to each of us, you and me, to urge each of US to repent, to turn to him.

Somewhere, we heard this story. In Acts 16, it says the Lord opened Lydia's heart to hear the good news spoken by Paul. God has made sure that each of us here *heard* the good news, and with his Spirit he opened each of our *hearts* to repent and trust.

And God is doing this all over the place. You are here this morning? This means that God purposely brought YOU into this story. God made sure YOU heard about the rescue, and God brought Jesus the Rescuer to YOU.

If someone asks you what Christians believe, at that point the story reaches out to them, also. They are hearing the story, and the story invites them in. And for us who have come in, let's thank God, and let's love him and serve him.

- 1 God Created
- 2 People Rebelled
- 3 People are Doomed
- 4 Rescue Part I: Israel.
- 5 Rescue Part II: Jesus
- 6 Rescue Part III: Gospel
- 7 Restoration

## 7 Restoration

Human history had a beginning, and human history as we know it will end. The story is not over yet. Human history will not go on indefinitely, and the End will come from God.

Jesus the Rescuer will come back and finish what he started. God wants his creation to be wonderful again, and he shall make that happen. When God comes to earth in a way he has not come before, there will first be judgement. The people who would not leave the rebellion, who continued to reject God's kindness until the end, will face his wrath and eternal judgement.

The people who received God's kindness, and rebelled against the rebellion, will receive God's blessing. We've been receiving his blessing all along, but we'll get it then like never before. And creation will become as it was before the first rebellion, or better. New heaven and new earth, and we will all be with the Lord forever. We will see God's face.

The church, now, in our worship of Jesus and our love for one another, is God's sign to the world of what is to come. We live out together now, in small pockets, the flavour of the new heaven and earth. That's our job. The church is an eschatological community, the spearhead of God's future, thrown by the Holy Spirit into the present age.

The church is a sneak preview for the world of how God's ultimate restoration will look. The church is God's kingdom beachhead, the place where the power of God invades our dark and hostile world. We live this out by a thousand small and unimpressive actions in which we are good to each other and care for each other, forgive and serve each other. God is training us for our future life with him.

This is the story that Christians believe. It is the real story of this world, this ordinary world which is not at all ordinary. It is the story of the trees and the animals and all creation and all people. Every day, all creation is in the middle of this story.

Christianity is a particular view of history. It is THE STORY of what is really taking place on earth. These seven points summarize that history, which is the one real story. Amen.

**PRAYER:** Our Father, whose throne is the heavens and whose footstool the earth, may your holy name be honoured, may your kingdom come, may your will be done, may earth be just like heaven. Thank you Father for daily food; please feed those who lack. Forgive us our sins as we have forgiven those who sinned against us. Don't lead us into testing or temptation, we don't do well; rescue us from evil and the evil one, we need your help. You are the King, and you have the power, so yours be the glory.

**BENEDICTION:** May God himself, the God of peace, make you holy through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.